
A WRITER'S MODEL

America's Legacy from the Iroquois League

In 1991, television journalist Bill Moyers interviewed Oren Lyons, chief of the Onondaga nation and a professor of American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Chief Lyons mentioned the upsurge of American-inspired democracy throughout the world and commented, "But America got it from the Indians. America got the idea of democracy and freedom and peace here."

Lyons's statement may seem extreme, but he is not alone in believing that Native Americans, particularly the Iroquois, influenced the colonists who founded the United States. In 1988, which was the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, a joint Congressional resolution stated that

the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself. (United States)

Despite an official resolution, many people do not know about this influence. What was the Iroquois Confederacy? What parallels between it and the American government have historians found? What contacts did Iroquois and colonial leaders have?

This Iroquois Confederacy, a union of five (later six) nations, originated more than four hundred years ago. Also known as the League of the Haudenosaunee and the League of the Five Nations, it traces its history to a legendary Huron, called Deganwidah, who is credited with uniting the Iroquois nations that formed it (Powless; Snow 58–59; Grinde and Johansen 28–29).

Deganwidah, along with another man named Ayonhwahthah, is said to have persuaded leaders of the Five Nations (the Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, and Onondaga) to accept a “code” based on a concern for three principles: righteousness, civil authority, and the health of society (Snow 60). The willingness of the leaders to embrace the code may have had much to do with their desire to end the cycle of self-destructive blood feuds in which many clans were entangled (Grinde and Johansen 28).

The League created an unwritten but detailed “Great Law of Peace,” or constitution, that was passed down through the generations. In 1900, the chiefs of the League approved an official written version of the constitution, drafted in English, that had been developed under the guidance of a Seneca chief named John Gibson (Snow 183–184).

The constitution authorized a council of fifty sachems, or chiefs, to make official decisions about affairs among member nations. Originally, these sachems were selected from leaders who had been chosen by powerful clan mothers within each nation but, eventually, leadership ability began to have more importance than family relationships (Johansen Forgotten 26). The number of each nation’s sachems varied. The Onondaga, for example, had fourteen sachems, while the Seneca had only eight. In League deliberations, however, each nation had just one vote, which was internally decided by its sachems. All of the League’s decisions had to be unanimous (Garbarino and Sasso 316).

An obvious parallel between the Iroquois League and the federal government is union itself. The League was a strong confederation of nations that were related by language and culture but had a history of being separate and quarrelsome (Jennings 362–63). The thirteen American colonies were likewise separate and sometimes at odds. First the Articles of Confederation, in 1781, and then the Constitution of the United States credited a strong union of these formerly divided colonies.

Also, the League dealt only with issues concerning all the nations, primarily matters involving safety and defense. It did not interfere in the internal affairs of member nations (Garbarino and Sasso 316). Similarly, the U.S. Constitution spells out the powers delegated to the federal government, including national defense, reserving all other powers to the states' own governments.

Both the Iroquois and U.S. constitutions established a representative government of delegates, and several historians have noted likenesses between Iroquois and Congressional procedures. Bruce E. Johansen explains in Forgotten Founders that the Great Law of Peace spelled out a “complex system of checks and balances,” with the Senecas and Mohawks called the “older brothers,” the Cayugas and Oneidas the “younger brothers,” and the Onondagas the “firekeepers” (24–25).

Negotiation was highly structured, and Johansen compares the younger and older brothers to a “two-house congress” and says, “The Onondagas filled something of an executive role, with a veto that could be overridden by the older and younger brothers in concert” (25).

As members of Congress do when working out compromise bills, League sachems conducted lengthy deliberations designed to overcome disputes and to create accord (Hooker; “Iroquois League”). To achieve unanimity, senior leaders spoke last, so that they could convey a synthesis or union of the opinions expressed by earlier speakers (Snow 61).

Finally, scholars have noted the Great Law's provisions for amendments and for accepting other peoples into the union (Johansen, Forgotten 24–25). Like the framers of the U.S. Constitution, the Iroquois provided a mechanism for changing their law, and they made “no bars on the basis of race or national origin.” Two colonial men were actually given full citizenship in the Iroquois Confederacy (Johansen, Forgotten 24).

Of course, the League and America's new government were not identical, and not everyone agrees that the Iroquois League was a direct model or had an important influence. Michael Newman, a political journalist, maintains that "Western civilization, beginning in Greece" was a closer model for the founders (17). He has pointed out differences in the Iroquois and U.S. systems, also noting that a respected Constitutional scholar, Michael Kammen, does not support the idea that the Iroquois influenced the writing of the Constitution (17). Kammen's books, A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture and The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History, in fact do not discuss the Iroquois League.

The differences Newman highlights are that the sachems were appointed, not elected; that representation on the Council wasn't proportional; and that Council votes had to be unanimous (17).

Historians who support the theory of Iroquois influence, however, do not claim that no differences existed. Grinde and Johansen, among others, have pointed out fundamental ones: The League, for example, had no coercive power to enforce decisions in the areas of military service or taxation (32). As Johansen replied to Newman's article, the point is not that colonial leaders tried to "copy" the Great Law but that Native Americans helped "shape the thoughts of our Founders" (Letter).

Newman's position, however, seems even to reject this idea. In his view, the writers of the Constitution had "nothing" to gain by "looking to the New World for inspiration" (17-18). Nevertheless, Newman does not discuss the considerable contact between colonial leaders and the Iroquois. The 1988 Congressional resolution states that "the original framers of the Constitution, including, most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy" (United States).

Benjamin Franklin is an especially clear link between the two political systems, as history documents. He was Pennsylvania's representative to the Iroquois Nations and, as clerk of the Assembly, served as recording secretary at a 1744 meeting between leaders of the Six Nations and the Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania colonies (Johansen, Letter). Here sachems advised the colonial governors to join together as the Iroquois had. One chief took a single arrow in his hand and snapped it easily. Then he took five arrows bound together with a deer sinew; they could not be broken.

There is no question that Franklin found the Iroquois League impressive. On March 20, 1750, he wrote to James Parker, his friend and fellow printer:

It would be a strange thing if Six Nations . . . should be capable of forming a scheme for such a union, and be able to execute it in such a manner as that it has subsisted ages and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like union would be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interests. (444)

In 1754, Franklin proposed his Albany Plan of Union for the American colonies; the plan resulted from a meeting at which Tiyanoga, an Iroquois chief, was an invited adviser (Johansen, Letter). Franklin's plan called for a Grand Council made up of delegates from the colonies. The number of delegates from each colony would vary, based not on population, but on the amount of tax revenues each colony contributed to the general treasury (Grinde and Johansen 107). The Albany Plan failed, but it planted the seeds for the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution.

Franklin and others who wrote the Constitution and earlier plans for union may not have specified—in historical documents—that they were using Native American political concepts and laws, but they did consider them. Records show that colonial leaders

purposefully studied many examples of union. Stephen L. Schechter, executive director of the New York State Bicentennial Commission, said, “They contemplated examples from Europe, examples from Greco-Roman times, examples from the Bible. And they also looked at the Native American examples, particularly the Iroquois Confederacy” (qtd. in “Iroquois Constitution”).

Most Americans today have probably heard something about the Iroquois League, but many are only dimly aware of the principles on which the League was based, not realizing that the people of the United States may owe a debt to the Six Nations for America’s political heritage. Among our nation’s founders, however, were men who were very familiar with the principles of the League—principles of “peace, brotherhood, and unity, a balance of power, the natural rights of all people, and sharing of resources” (Grinde and Johansen 29). It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that some historians maintain that our Constitution—which has so inspired the people of other nations—was not necessarily “cut entirely from European cloth” (Johansen, Letter).

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